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Church Ships

by Finn Bille

Photos courtesy of Krister Strandskov

Three ships hang in Fanefjord,
the church looks out to sea
and paintings in the ceiling
tell stories of the fall of man.

A devil with his pointed tail
looks through the ropes
of a frigate with its guns run out
while dangling over flames of hell

a poor parishioner and sailor man.
The organ blasts the martial tune
"King Christian stood at lofty mast"
to bless these men-of-war

hung from vaults above
on iron rods. Their models
could have seen the bleeding king
and heard the thunder of his guns.

These battle ships can testify
to the perils of the sea.
They aim their bowsprits at the altar
and the man nailed to the cross.

Their sails remind all worshipers
of Danish wind-blown vessels
bringing coffee from the East
and slave-cut sugar from the West.

The Devil grins through shrouds and
stays
while Adam at the gate of Paradise
looks back to see three bone-dry hulls
hung up and locked far from the
living sea.





Contextual note: Fanefjord Kirke is a medieval church on the southern tip of the island of Møn. This church is famous for its frescos created by Elmelundemesteren—the master craftsman and his crew who painted the interior of Elmelunde Kirke, where my grandparents are buried. The ceilings in both churches are vaulted.

All Danish churches that I have visited have one or more model ships hanging from the ceiling and facing the altar. Most models are sailing ships and many are ships of war showing their guns.

The tune is the Danish national anthem, “Kong Christian stod ved højen mast,” the equivalent of our American “Star-Spangled Banner.”

The bleeding king is Christian IV, who was wounded aboard his flag ship, *Trefoldigheden* (the Trinity), in 1644 at the battle of Kolberger Heide against a Dutch fleet allied with Sweden.

Coffee, the Danish national drink, came initially by sailing ships from the east. Sugar used to sweeten it came from Danish plantations on the Virgin Islands where slaves cut, gathered, and pressed the cane and loaded the sugar on Danish vessels.